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TAGS: PGOV PREL US TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY AND US-TURKISH RELATIONS AFTER THE ELECTIONS

REF: ANKARA 1803

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROSS WILSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Turkey's July 22 election will not quell, and may aggravate, the polarizing battles here over secularism, fundamentalism, nationalism, and minority (Kurdish) rights, and between the old elite and a rising new one. Ditto civil-military tensions, which will continue to express themselves loudly as Turkey heads toward the presidential election and in Ankara's confrontation with the PKK and northern Iraq. Turks still want to work with us, but US-Turkish relations have been a casualty of the electoral campaign -- reflecting and worsening our low public standing here. We should not play into efforts to pull us into Turkish battles. Post-election, we should take a deep breath, work on restoring momentum to US-Turkish relations, manage our problems and keep an eye on the long term. We will need to push the new government to meet us half way, and we both need to not allow problems to crowd out our common goals and objectives. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The likely, though not foreordained outcome of Sunday's voting is a single-party AKP government returned to office. (See reftel for details.) PM Erdogan's more slender majority may temper his mercurial instincts. A strong combined showing of the CHP and MHP opposition parties will embolden their assaults on him -- and a CHP/MHP led government cannot be precluded. The military will be right behind them. CHP, MHP and Kurdish nationalist voices will make parliament more strident, polarizing, and difficult to work with on issues of interest to us. The next key step is presidential voting that is expected within a month. Optimists point to Erdogan's remarks about a consensus candidate as suggesting a more cooperative process this time. Nothing is easy in Turkey, and compromise will be hard. Failure that leads to another general election in the autumn cannot be ruled out.

¶3. (C) Nothing in the campaigning or voting results will dampen the ideological and social divides here.

-- The secular-fundamentalist challenge will persist. It is the main calling card of the CHP, which gets little traction on economic or social issues beyond its core constituency. It is the main weakness of the AKP, which otherwise gets good marks for effective governance and economic management, even from many opponents.

-- The likely presence Kurdish MPs who have ties with the PKK will stoke nationalism among Turks and provoke the MHP and others. Parliamentary debate among them will be lively; it could be violent, too.

-- The broader conflict will continue unabated between a rising, socially conservative middle and lower middle class versus the old elites who have ruled Turkey for 80 years and are determined to use Ataturk to hold on to power.

¶4. (C) Nor will civil-military tension ease any time soon. Perhaps the opposite. After intervening in April, the military resumed its place as a back seat driver of Turkish democracy. As politics focuses on the presidential election in August, the military will overtly or covertly grab the wheel again to help the opposition in haggling over an appropriate consensus candidate. If the prospects for such a candidate fail, the military will probably intervene again, either through the judiciary or other state institutions, to prevent the election of an AKP president.

¶5. (C) As happens around the world, the US became a punching bag in this year's politicking. The media and politicians have outdone themselves in recent weeks complaining, in order of outrageousness, about our: inaction on the PKK, unwillingness to pressure Barzani to act against the PKK, support for the PKK, meetings with PKK leaders, responsibility for arms that the PKK uses, overt supply of arms to the PKK, senior US military involvement in all of the above, and worse. Turkey's MOU with Iran on gas cooperation was hailed, even by government critics, as "standing up" to the Americans and refusing to accept US domination of Turkey's energy supplies and foreign policy.

¶6. (C) The PKK flames are being vigorously fanned by the Turkish military. In late May, the TGS alerted the media here to a brief violation of Turkish airspace by US F-16s flying along the Turkey-Iraq border. Following that, TGS pumped out stories about a confrontation between Turkish and Peshmerga forces in Suleymaniyah, an alleged cross-border invasion, and the US arms to the PKK story. The military's effort is designed to embarrass the government and portray it as incompetent in protecting Turkey's security interests. It also stokes public paranoia about threats to the republic.

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The damage to US-Turkish relations, a perhaps regrettable by-product for the military, serves to strengthen the charges of government mismanagement.

¶7. (C) The AKP has risen to the bait. During this electoral campaign period, PM Erdogan and FM Gul have been unwilling to defend the US or US-Turkish relations. In between rubbish, their least damaging (to us) line has been, "if the US has done x, then it will be bad for our relations." Their behavior ensured there would be wilder and more damaging speculation in the media, rather than killing the story.

¶8. (C) Will this pass? Some of it will, and we need to encourage more -- as we did in the context of an improving relationship here after Erdogan's June 2005 visit to Washington. Early outreach to the new government leadership will be essential: a congratulatory message after the new government's formation, an early Secretary Rice conversation with the foreign minister (who may not be Gul), and the earliest possible face-to-face meetings among key ministers. We need especially to consult on Iraq -- not just on the PKK element, but also on the larger problems and the US posture there -- so as to keep Turkey with us on our top foreign policy priority.

¶9. (C) We and the new Turkish government also need to manage looming issues that have the potential for damaging our relations much more. Atop the list are the PKK and the Armenia genocide resolution (AGR).

¶10. (C) Turkey's July 22 election date may be a bad milestone for the PKK problem. Violence has been down for several weeks. The PKK apparently held back to help the Kurdish nationalist candidates and perhaps also the AKP. Despite public and private warnings, the government evidently decided not to alienate the same Kurdish voters or to cede control of Turkish Iraq policy to the military via a cross border operation (CBO), and the military opted not to insist on a CBO that would have burnished AKP nationalist credentials. As of July 23, all those constraints are off.

Violence may increase. It may also be that the military's preoccupation with annual promotions in early August, a hoped-for visit by PM Maliki in coming weeks, and ongoing US work with Turkey on the PKK problem will be enough to see us to September -- when a post-election government could take some new initiatives, including with the KRG. That is the best we can hope for.

¶11. (C) If the latest Pew poll puts support for the US at 9 percent, an AGR will move us to 0.9 percent (at best) and cripple prospects for constructive relations with Turkey's new government at the outset. Constraints on a CBO will be further undone. Positive help on Iraq, Iran, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Caspian energy, terrorism, Black Sea security, and other issues will, for a time at least, become the coincidental exception. If the French are a guide, this mission will find itself frozen out. Unlike the French, we can expect anti-Americanism here to boil over into demonstrations and possibly violence. These will feed mutual estrangement. Our hope remains to defer the Congressional confrontation over the AGR long enough so that the next government has a chance to take an initiative vis-a-vis Armenia that could change the US political calculus. A number of key, senior Turks are thinking the same way.

¶12. (C) The perfect storm in US-Turkish relations is not inevitable. On Iraq, Iran, terrorism, energy and many other topics, US and Turkish goals will remain the same. Turkey's elections, their results and the rhetoric that accompanied them will complicate an already fractious US-Turkish relationship. We need to let matters play out here and not, in our responses to ill-conceived words or actions, allow ourselves to transition from punching bag to pawn. After the voting, after all the bad things that have been said, and despite all the problems looming, we have to take a deep breath, put the rhetoric behind us (and insist Turkish authorities do too), and resume the efforts we made over the past two years to work together effectively where we can. This is the way, among other things, to further liberal democracy here. US interests in this country and in the region require as much.

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